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Gladys Lauriello  
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ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF INCREASED STUDENT ACCOUNTABILITY  
AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT ON STUDENT ATTENDANCE  
AT MIDDLE TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

by  
Gladys Lauriello

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate Division  
at  
Rowan University  
May, 1999

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor

Date Approved May 1999

## Abstract

Gladys Lauriello

Assessing The Effect Of Increased  
Student Accountability And Parental  
Involvement On Student Attendance  
At Middle Township High School  
1999

Dr. Ronald L. Capasso  
School Administration

The study examined what effect increasing student accountability through a series of pre-set consequences enforced on a “zero tolerance” basis, coupled with increased parent involvement through prompt communication regarding all student absences and tardy arrivals, would have on attendance. The study was held at Middle Township High School in southern New Jersey, a semi-rural school of grades 9-12 with a student population of approximately 1,000, most of whom drive or ride a school bus. The data was assembled during the first semester of the 1998-99 school year. The study, which measured attendance, both lateness and absence, through surveys and statistical data comparisons, found that attendance did improve when students were held accountable and parents were kept informed. It also revealed that neither parents nor students were satisfied with the increased accountability and both resented that the parent was not empowered to excuse lateness and/or absence for the student.

## **Mini-Abstract**

**Gladys Lauriello**

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## Acknowledgements

In the final analysis of this year of incredible labor and effort, three very separate yet linked areas of my life deserve appreciation and gratitude for their role in helping me reach this final goal. First, my family, my husband and sons, who have unselfishly sustained me and allowed me the personal freedom to give this project my best effort.

My co-workers at school, as well as the student body, allowed themselves to be used, yet another year, for surveys and experiments. They were cooperative, supportive and patient, as well as appreciative of the efforts we made for positive change. In particular, the administrative team, Dave Salvo, Mike Wilbraham and the secretarial staff, were all willing to put forth extra effort on my behalf. Ange Capuano, our attendance officer (among many other things) went to great lengths to educate me, guide me and cheer me on. Without her knowledge and support, the project could not have succeeded. Also essential was my field mentor, Karen Buesing, as a constant source of humor and information. She was patient, kind and always ready to help.

The staff at Rowan University's Educational Leadership department, especially Dr. Ronald Capasso, worked tirelessly to push, prod and somehow lead us all to a successful end to this process. Without their unflagging determination and positive attitude, this mission would never have been accomplished!

My final, and most heartfelt appreciation, is to Lynda Anderson-Towns, my project partner, co-worker, and dear friend. Lynda's steady guidance, her unshakeable conviction that we would survive and triumph, and her ability to keep focus, gave me the strength and balance to stay the course. The best part of this process was the friendship it helped us build.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Focus Of The Study

Attendance is an essential element in addressing the problems of at risk students. Strategies and interventions to reduce attendance problems must be combined to address the problems of individual students, the student's family and home situations, and the school's relationship with the students (Levine, 1984). Strategies should include developing incentives for students to attend and increasing communication with parents or other adult figures in the students lives (Ford & Sutphen, 1995).

Prior to 1992, the leadership of Middle Township High School, and the district as a whole, had been very stable and well defined. Attendance at the High School was supervised by a veteran administrator who was a lifelong area resident with strong ties to the community and a wealth of knowledge about the family backgrounds of most students. Both the principal and the superintendent also shared the philosophy and vision which guided the standards for the attendance procedures.

In 1992, the principal and the superintendent left the district. In addition, the veteran vice principal became ill and died rather suddenly. Subsequently, the administrative organization of Middle Township High School floundered. The new principal was unable to establish the clear leadership vision and standards of his predecessor. The constant change in central leadership also left the staff and community unclear as to the direction and purpose of district policies and programs. In such chaos,



the morale of the faculty declined sharply, and expectations for student conduct were unclear and sporadically enforced.

The advent of a new administrative staff, including a young, dynamic and highly motivated principal, as well as a redefined and well structured program, has had a dramatic effect on both the attendance problems of the district, and the morale and attitude of the entire school community. The leadership vision he has presented has been evident in both the policies and procedures adopted to address the problem, and in the manner in which they have been implemented.

### Purpose of the Study

The project will discover and assess the attendance and tardiness statistics for the high school using action based research

Participants in this study—parents, students and school personnel—will be given the opportunity to examine and alter their conduct and standards regarding attendance. The district, and the new administration, will have the opportunity to successfully address a serious leadership issue which was not successfully managed by their predecessors.

Data will be collected through computer-based records of attendance statistics. The study will result in a report to the school community and the County office. At this stage in the research, improved attendance will be defined as meeting the goal established by the County office. The intended product outcome is to meet this goal and establish a successful program which redefines the responsibilities of all participants in addressing the attendance concerns in the high school.

The interns will grow as leaders by assuming the roles and functions of school-based management while initiating and effectively managing change as both leader and

member of a leadership team. Skills in areas such as fact finding, questioning techniques, student management and communication will be developed. Valuable experience in dealing with both the school and the community will be gained.

The organizational change to Middle Township High School will encompass implementing new standards and strategies regarding attendance enabling the district to meet pre-established goals. If the project's product outcome is successful, the high school will have met its district objective with the County office and new standards and procedures will have been established and implemented.

### Definitions

The following words and phrases are unique to this study of risk management within an organization:

1. accountability – being held responsible for meeting identified achievement targets (Dinkins, 1997).
2. employability skills – habits deemed essential for successful employment
3. minor lates – students who arrive at school prior to the beginning of instruction.
4. major lates – students who arrive at school after the instructional day has begun.
5. Parental involvement – keeping parents/guardians informed as to problems with chronic offenders and establishing their role in altering student behavior.
6. truant – a student who is absent from school without an adequate excuse (i.e. illness).

### Limitations of the Study

The project will take place in Middle Township High School. The quantitative research will involve statistics from the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years, as well as September 1998 through February 1999. Parental and student studies will be limited to

incoming freshman students and their parents since this will be the only group to function solely under the new procedures in the high school. The faculty study group will consist of members of the high school discipline committee.

The resulting research findings of this study can be generalized beyond the walls of Middle Township High School. The elements of the study -- the people involved, the attendance structure, and the problems being addressed—are common to most public high schools.g leadership styles. Even the three other schools in the district will be able to utilize the information garnered in this study.

### Setting of the Study

#### Cape May County and Middle Township

Middle Township is a unique community which encompasses more than 72 square miles located in the center of Cape May County. According to the 1990 Census results, Cape May County has a population of 95,089 - 93% Caucasian, 6% African- American, and 1% other races (Cape May County, 1993). At the time of the study there were 14,685 school age children in the County, with 7,482 being male and 7,203 being female. There were a total of 85,537 housing units, but only 37,856 of those units are occupied because Cape May County is a resort area, and many houses are used seasonally for recreation. The median household income was \$30,435, and the per capita income was \$15,538.

Cape May Court House is home to Middle Township Public Schools. The town was originally known as Middletown, but the name was changed when the post office was established in 1803. Today, "Court House" is one of the many neighborhoods that make up Middle Township. It is also the host community for the County Government of five

Freeholders as well as the County Seat. In addition to Cape May Court House, Middle Township encompasses the neighborhoods of Burleigh, Dias Creek, Del Haven, Goshen, Grassy Sound, Green Creek, Reed's Beach, Rio Grande, Swainton, and Whitesboro.

Middle Township has an ever-increasing population of 14,771 according to the 1990 Census results. Of this total, 85% are Caucasian, 13% are African-American, and 2% account for other races. Middle Township has 20% of the County's school age children enrolled in its schools (Cape May County, 1993).

Middle Township is governed by three elected officials -- one mayor and two committeemen. The Township Committee has always supported Middle Township Public Schools; in fact, one of the Committeemen is a teacher at the high school. The two organizations have worked closely together for years and have recently developed both formal and informal interlocal agreements. The school district and the Township share busing, grounds and maintenance, paving, and police services.

#### Middle Township School District

Middle Township Public Schools is a K-12 district which draws students from all the neighborhoods of Middle Township. In addition, three K-8 sending districts (Avalon, Stone Harbor, and Dennis Township) send students to Middle Township High School and pay tuition.

Middle Township Public Schools consist of four schools servicing grades K-12. Elementary #1 includes grades K-2, Elementary #2 houses grades 3-5, Elementary #4, or the Middle School, includes grades 6-8, and Middle Township High School is home to grades 9-12. The diverse areas from which the students come result in a mixed culture of

values and beliefs in each building. Because there is only one school for each respective grade level, all students are fully integrated.

At the time of the study there was a total of 2,830 students enrolled in Middle Township School District. This figure includes resident students as well as those received from sending districts, and the total represents a 22% minority population.

A total of 242 teachers are employed by the district. Forty-nine percent of these instructors have less than ten years of teaching experience, and approximately 30% have a master's degree or higher. This low figure is due in part to the fact that the closest institution offering graduate level studies is 55 miles north of Cape May County. During the last few years, however, more and more courses have been offered in Cape May County through the Education Institute of Rowan University and also through Rutgers University. Many teachers are taking advantage of this opportunity to further their educations. In addition, the district has recently negotiated reimbursement for an unlimited number of approved graduate credits annually for each staff member, as an incentive to promote further training.

Middle Township Public Schools is run by an elected nine member Board of Education, all of whom reside in Middle Township. Due to enrollment figures, the sending district of Dennis Township also has representation on the Board, but this member may only vote on matters that relate to the high school.

The administrative structure for the Middle Township School District begins at the top with the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Robert D. Elder, who began his tenure in August, 1996. The next level of administration includes the Director of Special Education, Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, and the building principals.

Included in the next level are the Transportation Supervisor, Supervisor of Maintenance, assistant principals, and subject area department chairpersons.

Middle Township School District operates within a total budget of \$23,659,143.59 and is funded by a combination of New Jersey state aid, local taxes and other sources such as federal aid and local district surplus. Middle Township receives 45.6% of its revenues from State Aid. This seemingly high amount of State funding is due in part to Middle's classification as a District Factor Grouping (DFG) B. Districts are rated by using various factors including parental education, occupations, income, poverty level families, unemployment, and urbanization. All districts in New Jersey are divided into ten groups and labeled from A to J. Middle Township is in one of the lowest groups which contains almost all of the cities and poor rural districts in the state.

The local taxes contribute 44.1% of the revenues, and 10.2% comes from other resources. From the total budget, 46.4% is spent on instruction. Overall, the district spends \$6,341 per pupil which is below the state average of \$7,573.

#### Middle Township High School

The present high school building is the fourth to house the high school. From 1907 to the present, the enrollment has grown from 39 students to over 1,000 students. This enrollment includes Middle Township students along with students from Dennis Township, Stone Harbor and Avalon. The present building is located on Bayberry Drive which is off the Garden State Parkway. The Parkway and Routes 47 and 55 provide easy access to the high school from all directions.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the construction of the present building took place in October, 1960, and the first classes moved into the building early in 1962. The original

structure had three wings referred to as A, B, and C, but its blueprint contained plans for an additional wing. D wing was added in 1970 and an addition to C wing was built in 1973. In 1992, a 7 million dollar Performing Arts Center was constructed which included a 1,000 seat auditorium, a new band room, choral room, and four small classrooms. Presently, the building includes 48 teaching classrooms, a guidance suite, administrative offices, a gym with four teaching stations, and a media center including a writing lab used for group instruction or for independent student work. Adequate playing fields are located on the east side of the building and two trailers have been positioned on the south side of the school. One of these trailers houses a conference area and child study team office, and the other provides department chairpersons with office space.

Middle Township High School is a community of learning whose common purpose is to educate and train its diverse population of students to be literate, understanding, and active citizens who can perpetuate the tradition of an educated, productive life in a complex, ever-changing, democratic society. It is believed that life, experience, and reality are a continuum, and that the high school is merely an interlude in students' lives that they all must pass through on their way to their respective futures. Every student is offered the opportunity to acquire the intellectual, physical, and social skills necessary to successfully function in society today. These skills are presented through a flexible program of interaction and instruction in basic skills, general knowledge, and cultural appreciation, with additional opportunities in career education, economic skills, occupational competency, and preparation for a changing society (Middle Township High School Philosophy Statement, 1992 Middle States Report).

Middle Township High School's curriculum reflects a traditional approach to education. Emphasis is placed on skills development and the ability to use the skills effectively. There are three basic instructional programs available for students: School-to-Success, College Preparatory, and Honors. Cape May County Technical High School provides full day and shared time programs for vocationally oriented students as well as for students with special needs.

Academically talented students are offered a full range of scholastically demanding and college preparatory subjects. Honors courses are available in English, social studies, science, and math. Advanced Placement courses are also available in these disciplines as well as computer science. Presently, Middle Township High School offers a total of eight Advanced Placement courses and offers three dual credit science courses through an agreement with Cumberland County College.

A full college preparatory program is offered with specialized sciences, math through calculus, computer science, computer programming, and four levels of foreign language in French, Latin, and Spanish. A School-to-Success program is also offered which leads to shadowing, mentoring, and work study programs in Cooperative Office Education and Cooperative Industrial Education. Special Education and Compensatory Education in English and math are also available for students needing specialized assistance.

Students must accumulate 120 credits in order to graduate from Middle Township High School. Of these 120 credits, 85 must be in required courses. Each student is required to complete one year of computer education.



The administrative staff of Middle Township High School includes Mr. David Salvo, Principal; Mr. Michael Wilbraham, Vice Principal; and Mrs. Gladys Lauriello, Coordinator of Special Projects (Non-Supervisory). The principal has returned to the district this year, having served as vice-principal for two years in the past. The vice principal is in his second year and the Coordinator of Special Projects is a veteran member of the teaching staff who was appointed to a newly established position this year.

There are 84 teachers in the high school, 44 male and 40 female. There are only six minority teachers. Approximately 29% of the total teaching staff have earned a master's degree and only two staff members possess a doctorate. The number of faculty members allows for a student-teacher ratio of 13:1.

The support staff consists of nine secretaries, one library assistant, three teacher's aides, and six custodians. Middle Township High School has one school nurse and four guidance counselors, one of whom serves as the Guidance Chairperson.

There are 1,044 students enrolled at Middle Township High School. Of the 1,044 enrolled, 542 are male and 502 are female. Approximately 83% of the total student population are Caucasian, 14% are African-American, and 3% represent other races. Approximately 33% of the school population are from the sending districts of Stone Harbor, Avalon, and Dennis Township.

All Middle Township students are encouraged to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), but on the average, approximately 150 students take the test. The average verbal score for the 1996-97 school year was 511, and the average math score was 501. These scores reflect a steady increase over the past three years.

On the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11) taken in October of 1996, 93% of all juniors tested passed the reading section, 91% passed the mathematics portion, and 94% passed the writing section. In all categories, Middle Township scored above the state average and the average for schools in District Factor Grouping A.

The overview of the community, school district, its staff, and its students provides the foundation on which the internship experience was built. More specifically, the communication project resulted in complete interaction with the entire high school community.

### Significance of the Study

A well structured attendance policy with clearly defined procedures including communications and consequences is an essential foundation element in an effective school. If the attendance is consistently managed, it will have a positive effect on all other major elements of the school.

Students, staff and community members establish their attitude towards the importance of school based upon the standards maintained by the leadership. Attendance is the key element in attaining success academically as well as socially. The school is expected to establish and maintain behavior which will enable students to be successful in life. Attendance is a key component in this process.

The study will measure the impact of improving communication and increasing accountability upon student behavior. It will examine whether personal contact with the home and sequential consequences for non-compliance will affect attendance at Middle Township High School. If successful, the study will enable the high school to meet its objective with the County office.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 presents a Review of the Literature related to organizational communication. Chapter 3 details the Design of the Study, including the development of the research design and the research instruments utilized to obtain data on various aspects of communication including job satisfaction, leadership style, and message structure. This chapter will also include a description of the sample population, the data collection approach, and the data analysis plan. Chapter 4 will present the Research Findings and Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions, implications, and the need or further study.

## Chapter Two

### Review Of The Literature

Attendance is one of the major issues confronting today's educational leaders. Literature suggests that strategies and interventions to reduce attendance problems must be combined to address the problems of individual students, the student's family and home situations, and the school's relationship with the students (Levine, 1984). Strategies should include developing incentives for students' to attend and increasing communication with parents or other adult figures in the students lives (Ford & Sutphen, 1995).

According to a recent study, home-school links are of vital importance if the parents of chronic absentees are to realize the value of education (Wolfendale, 1992). Recently, a national magazine which cites trends and events that demonstrate the on-going breakdown of values and standards, cited the following as evidence that "the apocalypse is upon us:" "Parents of high school students in Cincinnati, Ohio, let their kids skip school so they can stand in line to buy Nike's \$140 Michael Jordan sneakers" (SI, 1997).

As a district objective, Middle Township High School has attempted to improve its student tardiness/attendance rate since 1997. This year, Principal David Salvo set the following as the district goal: "By June, 1999, as a result of instituting revised attendance procedures, there will be a 10% reduction in the number of student latenesses to school." In his response as to why the district failed to meet its goal in the previous years

(tardiness actually increased from 7,828 incidents in 1997 to 9,157 in 1998), Mr. Salvo cited a lack of appropriate supervision, treatment of chronic offenders and a lack of parental involvement in the total late process as primary factors (Elder, 1998).

Researchers have established a clear link between family involvement and student achievement. But although most participants in education—administrators, teachers, students and their families—recognize the importance of this partnership, it is not often that they stop to ask themselves why. A student's life outside the four walls of school has a large impact on success at school. Family involvement offers an opportunity to tie home and school lives together, building a strong foundation of caring and supportive adults resulting in higher achievement (Connors & Epstein, 1994).

Connors and Epstein also cite the following as benefits of family involvement:

- *Increased student accountability.* Schools have found an increase in student accountability when they form a relationship with the child's family. Behaviors improve with consistent communication.
- *Changed perceptions of school.* Building positive experiences for parents who have previously been unsuccessful in school has innumerable benefits for both the parents and the students. The belief that success is possible is a base line for all achievement.

This belief system begins at home.

Connors and Epstein also note that as students progress into middle school and high school, there is a dramatic decline in family involvement. This, they observe, is due to many factors, including the structure of many secondary schools that inhibits family/teacher communications and the increasing need for student autonomy as they work their way toward adulthood (1994).

Over three decades of research shows that families are important educators of their children. When families are involved in their children's education in positive ways, children achieve higher grades and have better attendance at school (Ballen and Moles, 1996).

Recent studies show that parents, students and teachers alike place high priority on family involvement at the high school level. The difference from the primary years is the focus of that involvement. Successful secondary involvement efforts share the following characteristics:

- The student takes responsibility in defining home school partnerships which validates and supports increasing independence.
- There is a distinct focus on the future as students welcome and need adult guidelines in preparing for life after high school.
- High expectations for student achievement continue to play a major role in student success, with motivation being an important ingredient (OSPI, 1995).

Research has shown that schools which function with a strong sense of community and shared sense of purpose achieve greater success and support for change (Irmsher, 1997). Students must emerge from school with not only the academic and vocational skills needed in order to be successful employees, but also with a set of *employability* skills (Lankard, 1990). According to such research, increased automation has reduced the need for supervision of entry-level workers, thus increasing the need for the workers to operate independently, particularly in the area of personal responsibility. Under the new "school to careers" programs, practicing good work habits, including regular attendance, is deemed an essential component of employability (Lankard, 1990).

Absenteeism is more prevalent among 14-15 year olds (O'Keefe, 1993) and is affected by parent-condoned truancy (Ruddock, 1994). The problem is exacerbated by these younger adolescents modeling their behavior upon activities legitimized by their older peers (Irving, 1995).

Home/school links are of vital importance for the parents of truanting pupils whose attitudes and values often conflict with those of the school policies (Wright, 1992). According to Wright, gaining the support of parents should result in a general commitment to school, which should reduce truancy. Parental contact may also help the high school to ascertain reasons for tardiness and absenteeism, which in turn can result in improved policies (Portner, 1998).

The state of American education today is not about the latest ranking of schools or students. It is about whether society is working fast enough to educate and save this generation of young people. The nation seems to be drifting toward a new concept of childhood that says youngsters can fend for themselves.

It must be recognized that public education is at ground zero of almost every social, economic and cultural tension of the times. Principals and teachers directly confront violence, the breakdown of the family, ethnic and racial tension and the growing mismatch between the classroom and the job market. (Riley, 1994).

In a 1993 survey, Riley reports, half the students with below average grades reported that their parents had spent little or no time with them on schoolwork. According to a PTA poll, 40% of parents across the country believe they are not devoting enough time to their offspring's education. The very process of setting standards will have an enormous impact on education. As standards are set, Riley states,

they will reshape education and encourage long overdue reform. The most critical factor in this process is the reconnecting of families and schools to help youngsters succeed. Research confirms that when parents are partners in their children's education, the results are improved student achievement, better attendance, reduced dropout rates and decreased delinquency. Riley further states that research on the performance of high school students has shown that parents who are consistently informed about their offspring's progress can contribute to higher achievement (1994).

Another 1994 study found that parental involvement was a "significant predictor" of student achievement and behavior (Wagner, Lord 1995). Absenteeism is one of the primary factors over which parents can exercise authority. Differences in student achievement levels can be directly correlated to the level of control parents exercise on such factors. Families can improve their children's achievement by making sure their children attend school regularly (Barton & Coley, 1992).

Families who are consistently informed about their children's progress at school have higher-achieving children (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The partnership between parents and the school is key to creating a climate at home and at school that is conducive to learning.

For some schools, absenteeism is the expected standard. Parents may even seem puzzled when the school attempts to set more stringent attendance standards. When a serious breakdown in attendance occurs, the secondary breakdown is in homework, make-up assignments and monitoring class attendance, since the numbers become too staggering (Harrington, 1995).



According to Ms. Harrington, it is important to inform parents of the patterns of their child's absences, as well as the overall number of absences, and to tie these factors to their child's poor academic performance. Teachers also should be notified of those students who have a pattern of poor attendance. Personal contact with both the student and the home following any absence was deemed essential if such patterns are to change (1995).

By establishing a sequential program of incentives and rewards for improved attendance, Ms. Harrington noted that the attitudes of both parents and students were altered. Both now understood the need for regular school attendance and were aware that the school would hold them accountable for non-compliance. They also demonstrated a significant increase in self-esteem since regular attendance brought them not only rewards, but greater academic achievement and a more positive relationship with school personnel. Her conclusion—attention builds attendance (1995).

Princeton High School, as a model for the state School Board's Association, has established an attendance policy based on five fundamental assumptions:

- The best way for any student to learn is to attend class.
- The responsibility for ensuring such attendance is shared by the student, parents, teachers and school administrators.
- A student's absence from class may only result from illness, religious or legal obligation, family-determined need or college visits (maximum of three days).
- Excessive student absence from a course is legitimate grounds for withholding credit for that course.

- The school district has the responsibility to address the consequences of students' losing credit because of excessive absences (NJBOE, 1997).

Under New Jersey monitoring guidelines, school districts are expected to demonstrate overall pupil attendance of at least 90 per cent each day that a school is in session. Therefore, a school may require that each student attend 90 per cent of their scheduled classes in order to receive credit. Translated into daily attendance, this means that no student in New Jersey may, for any reason, be absent more than 18 days in a full year course or 9 days in a semester course without losing credit for that course (NJBOE, 1997).

Nonattendance has potential negative consequences for students, families, schools, and society. Nonattenders generally fall behind their peers in academic achievement and the development of social competence. Their parents face pressure from the school, and may even receive fines or jail time for failure to comply with compulsory attendance laws. Budgets for most school districts are based on average daily attendance, so high absenteeism can result in loss of school funds. Non attendance is associated with a lack of preparation to enter the workforce and higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and involvement in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Ford & Sutphen, 1996).

Research suggests that interventions to reduce attendance problems must combine strategies that address the problems of individual students, the students' family and home situations, and the school's relationship with the students (Levine, 1984). The high school attendance programs can be described as remedial: reactive, corrective efforts to bring about change where there is a recognized problem (Lofquist, 1993). Many student

absences can be linked to family behaviors, which seem to impede school attendance such as limited or inconsistent parental involvement in school preparation routines. Patterns such as no fixed homework time, no established wake-up routine and transportation problems were all identified as contributing to absenteeism and tardiness ((Ford & Sutphen, 1996).

Ford and Sutphen also point out that telephone-based family interventions which involve parents in school activities and encourage them to establish school preparation routines, including seeking alternative forms of transportation, helped the student to achieve more success in regular attendance (1996).

Literature on absenteeism written after 1985 demonstrates a shift in focus from the student as truant to the school as both part of the problem and the solution. Four major principles are necessary to any intervention—awareness, change in perspectives, early intervention, and cooperation and involvement. Components in an intervention include developing and implementing attendance policies; monitoring, tracking and recording; getting parents involved; providing counseling and guidance; and providing relevant curriculum or alternative programs. Research shows that programs implemented as schoolwide improvements have consistently been successful in reducing attendance problems (Harte, 1995).

The Colorado Department of Education has defined *accountability* as holding students, parents, educators and community members responsible for meeting identified student achievement targets through a continuing cycle of planning, evaluation and reporting. It further cites that accountability is the effective use of information to focus energy toward the attainment of student results. Effective accountability focuses on the

right questions, chooses the right indicators of student performance and reports the results to the right audiences (Dinkins, 1997).

In one of New Jersey's most rapidly expanding educational domains, charter schools, student accountability is greatly increased as most rules and regulations are waived, other than those related to building safety and academic assessment. Students are subject to explicit accountability. In several schools, students functioning under the individual accountability guidelines demonstrated noteworthy gains in both attendance and conduct (Nathan, 1996).

A spokesman for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Robert Mahaffey, says many schools are fighting problems with chronically late and absent students. It's important, he notes, for schools to create policies that get to the root of the problem. Students may be late because of problems at home, lack of reliable transportation or carelessness. To solve the problem, Mahaffey says, there's a need to find out *why* (Portner, 1998).

School leaders, particularly principals, play a key role in school improvement. While the principal is not the only source of leadership, research shows that their efforts often provide the initiative and shape the direction changes ultimately take. The principal acts as a technical manager, focusing on "nitty-gritty details" while also serving as a symbolic leader, building a new culture and providing the vision and passion needed for improvements to occur (Deal and Peterson, 1993).

In summary, pupil attendance is a vital component in any school program. The standards and expectations for students should be clear and consistent, as should consequences for non-compliance. The most essential element in successful attendance is

involvement and support from the family and community. Educational leaders should establish a firm link with these constituents and utilize it effectively to bring about change and more positive outcomes.

## Chapter Three

### The Design Of The Study

#### Research Design

Recognizing the importance of attending school on time and on a regular basis, Middle Township High School had established a goal for improving their performance in these areas. In the two years prior to the study, the district had failed to meet this goal or to reduce student lateness. In fact, in the second year, the rate of lateness actually increased.

Records were kept via computer for daily student attendance, including tardy arrivals and excused or unexcused absences. The data gathered from these records—number of tardy arrivals and absences—was then measured and compared. An audit was conducted through the utilization of a survey, which included components on the revised procedures and policies, examining their impact on attendance and those who were expected to comply. The information gathered from respondents—students, parents and teachers—was shared with the school and the County offices in a report. A follow-up review of current practices was held to formulate a plan to address problem areas.

Regular, prompt attendance is essential to successful learning. The research study allowed the high school staff and administration, as well as students' families, to play a more active role in student attendance. The regular contact between the school and the home mandated by the study enabled both groups to look closely at the patterns of attendance for individual students. This, in turn, allowed them to address each student

who failed to meet expectations on an individual basis in terms of accountability and behavior modification.

Data was compiled from the first semester of the 1998-99 school year. It was then compared with data from the same time frame for the two previous school years in which the district failed to meet its attendance goals. Results were discussed with the school and community, as well as the County offices. 137 surveys were distributed. The data they provided was analyzed as it addressed both the areas of accountability and parental involvement. Results in all areas were discussed in reference to others. Conclusions were drawn and corresponding implications were formulated.

#### Development and Design of Research Instrument

The research proposal outlined two areas of focus within the study. The first addressed the effect increasing student accountability would have on student attendance. The second examined the effect of increasing parental involvement.

The study results were determined by statistical data assembled through the school's data processing system. Individual student records on attendance were maintained for 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99. These records were then measured and compared to determine the impact the changes in procedure generated by the study had had on student attendance.

In addition, a survey instrument was designed to measure the satisfaction of the participants (students, staff and parents) affected by the new policies. This instrument was completed by a sampling of parents, staff and students to determine their reaction to the new procedures. The instrument measured satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with the new procedures using a Likert scale ranging from Highly Satisfied through Neutral to

Highly Dissatisfied. In an effort to avoid the fatigue factor, the instrument was two pages in length and used a Scantron response sheet. It remained comprehensive enough to yield a profile of the satisfaction level of the participants. It also provided a section for a brief written comment.

### Description of the Sample

The sample for this research study included attendance statistics from the first semester of three years of school attendance records for Middle Township High School. The survey sampling included 67 staff members, 43 students and 19 parents.

The survey, which measured the effects of the changes, was distributed at the end of the first semester to members of three groups involved in school management; the student council, the parent advisory council committee and the faculty. In order to expedite a high response rate, the survey was distributed at their regular monthly meeting, with ample time allowed for response. The intern met with each group prior to their completion of the survey to explain the project and its purpose within the school.

Because reaction to the changes in the attendance policies and procedures was rarely neutral (either strongly for or against the change seemed the norm), most respondents were eager to provide their input and, therefore, the survey response rate was quite positive. Parents, students and staff all appeared eager to either express their support of a positive change or vent their frustration at perceived injustices.

### Data Collection Approach and Analysis Plan

The quantitative data was assembled through cooperation with the data processing clerk at Middle Township High School. Comparative data from the first semester of the two previous school years, as well as the year of the study, were compiled. A comparison



of the monthly attendance and tardiness figures was completed. These figures included both excused and unexcused lates and absences.

The qualitative data was garnered through a survey instrument, which was distributed and collected at a regular monthly meeting for each organization selected as the appropriate representative group. To show appreciation and encourage cooperation, refreshments were served as the completed surveys were returned.

81% of the distributed surveys were completed and returned. Several student surveys had to be set aside due to a failure to correctly follow the directions (multiple responses, nonsense doodling, etc.). A total of 19 parent surveys were received from members of the parent advisory council. 43 student surveys were returned from members of student council (4.57 % of the student population of Middle Township High School). The faculty returned 67 surveys (79.1% of the staff).

The data was examined as it affected each of the research areas (student accountability and parental involvement). The survey provided information as to the attitudes and degree of satisfaction with the new procedures from the various respondent groups. The survey addressed specific elements of the new policy such as the “zero tolerance” approach and the Saturday “make up” sessions, to measure their acceptance and effectiveness.

By identifying the objections and concerns regarding the new attendance procedures, conscious effort can be made to improve those areas that elicited a negative or ineffective response. The research and resulting data enable the administration to measure whether the new procedures are effective in addressing attendance concerns. They also provide a synopsis of student and parental objections to the higher rate of

accountability in order to move toward a more positive position in an effort to achieve student success.

## Chapter Four

### Presentation Of The Research Findngs

Research has established that student attendance is a major factor contributing to the quality of academic performance. Students who are chronically absent and/or tardy tend to be less successful academically as well. This study, conducted at Middle Township High School, yielded significant data, all of which addresses the goal of the research project: to increase the effectiveness of the attendance program by increasing student accountability and parental involvement in the process.

In examining the historical data, the interns learned that the homeroom period had been changed in the 1996-97 school year to a mid-morning time period in an effort to secure more accurate attendance data regarding student absences. Due to problems this change created in the school culture (increased absences during first period, increased student lateness, etc.), the decision was made to return to the traditional homeroom format at the start of the school day (7:55 a.m.). Student lateness, although a district objective with the County office, was not addressed in terms of consequences for chronic offenders, although “sign in” monitors were positioned by each doorway so that accurate tracking of lateness could be maintained.

In the present school year, student attendance and tardiness were closely monitored, again at the traditional, “ start of the day”, time period. The institution of immediate consequences (30-90 minute detentions, depending upon the degree of

lateness) helped to reduce the number of chronic lates (those students with more than 6 lates in a semester) to less than 20 chronic offenders.

As previously noted, the data for this project was assembled using statistics on attendance from prior school years, as well as the first semester of the current year, in which the new policies and procedures were implemented.

**TABLE I**  
**MTHS STUDENT ATTENDANCE STATISTICS**  
**1998-99**

<b>TARDINESS</b>			
	<b>1996 1037 students</b>	<b>1997 1077 students</b>	<b>1998-99 1088 students</b>
<b>Sept.</b>	591	803	133
<b>Oct.</b>	932	1091	206
<b>Nov.</b>	758	840	106
<b>Dec.</b>	805	928	179
<b>Jan.</b>	1066	954	188
<b>TOTAL</b>	7810	9138	812
<b>ABSENCES</b>			
	<b>1996 1037 students</b>	<b>1997 1077 students</b>	<b>1998-99 1088 students</b>
<b>Sept.</b>	971	1416	1024
<b>Oct.</b>	1259	1667	1423
<b>Nov.</b>	1537	1368	1478
<b>Dec.</b>	1360	1279	1542
<b>Jan.</b>	1449	1608	1728
<b>TOTAL</b>	6576	7338	7195

The statistical data outlined in Table I indicated two outcomes for the project. The number of late arrivals had been reduced by over 80% in the first semester, indicating that the project was a success. Since the district goal was to reduce the tardy arrivals by 15%, the interns had met and surpassed the expectations of both the district and the County Superintendent.

Table I's attendance statistics, however, indicated a very different outcome. Although the figures showed a decrease in the initial months, by November, the number of student absences began to show a significant increase. Although the overall population of the school had also increased, the rise in absences far exceeded the increase in enrollment. The interns concluded that the level of concern regarding absences was far lower than that for arriving late, prompting students to remain at home or to return home when their late arrival would mandate a detention, even for 30 minutes.

The outcomes measured by the statistical data indicated a need to examine the reaction of both students and parents to the changes in attendance procedures. A survey addressing the reaction of those involved in the project (parents, staff and students) was completed at the end of the first semester. The survey addressed specific areas affected by the change in procedures and policies to measure the impact of these changes on the individuals involved.

Table II measures the outcomes of the surveys as they were recorded for each group. The parents, students and staff differed widely in their response to the changes in policies and procedures and in their perception as to the success of the new program.

TABLE II  
MTHS SURVEY RESULTS

1998-99

Parents	A	B	C	D	E	No answer
Question #2			9	2	2	
#3	7		1		5	
#4	8	2	2	1		
#5	6	4	2	1		
#6	12		1			
#7	11	1		1		
#8		2			10	1
#9	1	6	2		1	3
# of surveys	13					

Students	A	B	C	D	E	No answer
Question #2	21	22	24	3	6	1
#3	32	32	3	2	8	0
#4	7	12	4	23	29	2
#5	5	9	6	12	45	0
#6	14	43	6	1	11	2
#7	13	7	6	34	12	5
#8	18	31	5	4	14	5
#9	19	7	17	9	13	12
# of surveys	77					

Staff	A	B	C	D	E	No Response
Question #2		5	3	16	21	
#3	9	13	8	6	3	6
#4	36	9				
#5	42	3				
#6	43	1	1			
#7	34	10		1		
#8	1	5	6	2	11	20
#9	7	7	1	1	2	27
# of surveys	45					

Answer Totals	A	B	C	D	E	No Response
Question #2	21	27	36	21	29	1
#3	48	45	12	8	16	6
#4	51	23	6	24	29	2
#5	53	16	8	13	45	
#6	69	44	8	1	11	2
#7	58	18	6	36	12	5
#8	19	38	11	6	35	26
#9	27	20	20	10	16	42
# of surveys	135					

The first group to complete the survey was the parents. For this, the interns chose to use the Parent Advisory Council from Middle Township High School. Although the turnout was less than anticipated for the January meeting, it was felt that the survey results would be more accurate if the interns were available to answer questions and offer an explanation of the intent of the process prior to the completion of the survey. The interns, having worked with the Parent Advisory Council since September, also believed that the group, though small in numbers, did represent a cross reference of the school's population in terms of gender, race and socio-economic background.

As shown in Table II, 70% of the parent group stated that they were neutral regarding the new attendance policy. 54% stated that their child had been late 1-4 times in a marking period, while 38% stated that their child had never been late. 62% believed that the new policy was highly satisfactory and effective, including the "zero tolerance" aspect of the program, although, for that area, the percentage drops to 55%.

Table II also reveals that 93% of those parents surveyed believed that the new policies have improved attendance and reduced tardiness. 88% felt that the new policies provided effective consequences for chronic absences. 78% wanted expanded criteria for excused lateness and 58% wanted more days for college visitations to be excused (present maximum is 3 school days).

The student responses came from the student council. Of the 77 students who returned the survey, the group was evenly divided at close to 30% who were highly satisfied, 30% somewhat satisfied and 30% neutral to the previous policy, with less than 10% highly dissatisfied. 40% admitted they were late 1-4 times in a year and another 40% stated they were late 5-8 times in a year. Over 10% said they were never late.

37% of the students stated they were highly dissatisfied with the revised consequences for lateness. 22% were somewhat dissatisfied and 10% were highly satisfied. 62% were highly dissatisfied with the “zero tolerance” approach and 59% believed that this new approach forced students to lie and miss school. 46% felt the new policy treated “good kids” the same as chronic offenders. 42% would like to see parents able to provide excused for their child’s lateness and 22% want parents to be able to excuse more than 18 days of absence. 25% want family vacation days excused and 22% want more absences per marking period (present maximum is 6).

45 staff members returned surveys at the end of a regular monthly faculty meeting. Per Table II, 45% of the staff felt the previous policy for attendance was highly unsatisfactory, although many indicated that the policy was not enforced properly, rendering it ineffective. No one on staff indicated that they were satisfied with the previous policy.



80% of the staff found the new policy highly satisfactory and effective, while 84% were highly satisfied with “zero tolerance”. Again, no one indicated that either the policy or the “zero tolerance” approach, was unsatisfactory. 90% believed that the new policy had reduced tardiness and improved attendance. 74% believed that the new policy was a fair and effective consequence for absences and 24% believed that it was an improvement, but not an effective deterrent for absences.

In the questions on the survey regarding changes in the policy for future years, the respondents indicated that they wanted “no changes” by over 50%. Those that did want change (15% in each area) cited either family vacations or college visitations as acceptable reasons for increasing excused absences

In the “free response” section of the surveys, most parents expressed frustration at not being allowed to determine whether their child could arrive at school late with an adequate excuse. They expressed frustration and resentment that their judgement as to whether the excuse was adequate was deemed untrustworthy, as they perceived it. They felt the “zero tolerance” was too harsh and should be modified to allow some tolerance for human error, like occasionally oversleeping or a small personal crisis.

The students’ comments reflected a much stronger resentment of the change. Students referred to the policy as “Nazi-like”. They felt that they were being held to a far too stringent standard of conduct. “Everyone’s late sometime” was a common comment. The students also indicated that a growing number of them were not attending school on days when they would have to arrive late, rather than accept what they perceived to be an unfair consequence.

Students wanted all family vacation and college visitation days excused, regardless of their number, since they felt these were “legitimate” reasons to miss school. Students also wanted a return to the previous policy where they had five “chances to be late” and could use all 18 days in a single marking period, before they received consequences. Consequences were necessary, they agreed, but should be limited to chronic offenders, rather than those who occasionally arrive late or miss school.

The staff, by far, offered the most positive response to the change. The staff comments were, for the most part; very supportive of the new policy and strongly urged that they not be “watered down” in the future. The responses indicated that the “zero tolerance” policy reduced the appearance of prejudice and favoritism and kept the record keeping area of the policy simple. Several teachers did express concern about students missing school because they would not sign in late, however, they felt that issue, along with early dismissals, should be addressed in the future policy, rather than amending the present policy to be more lenient.

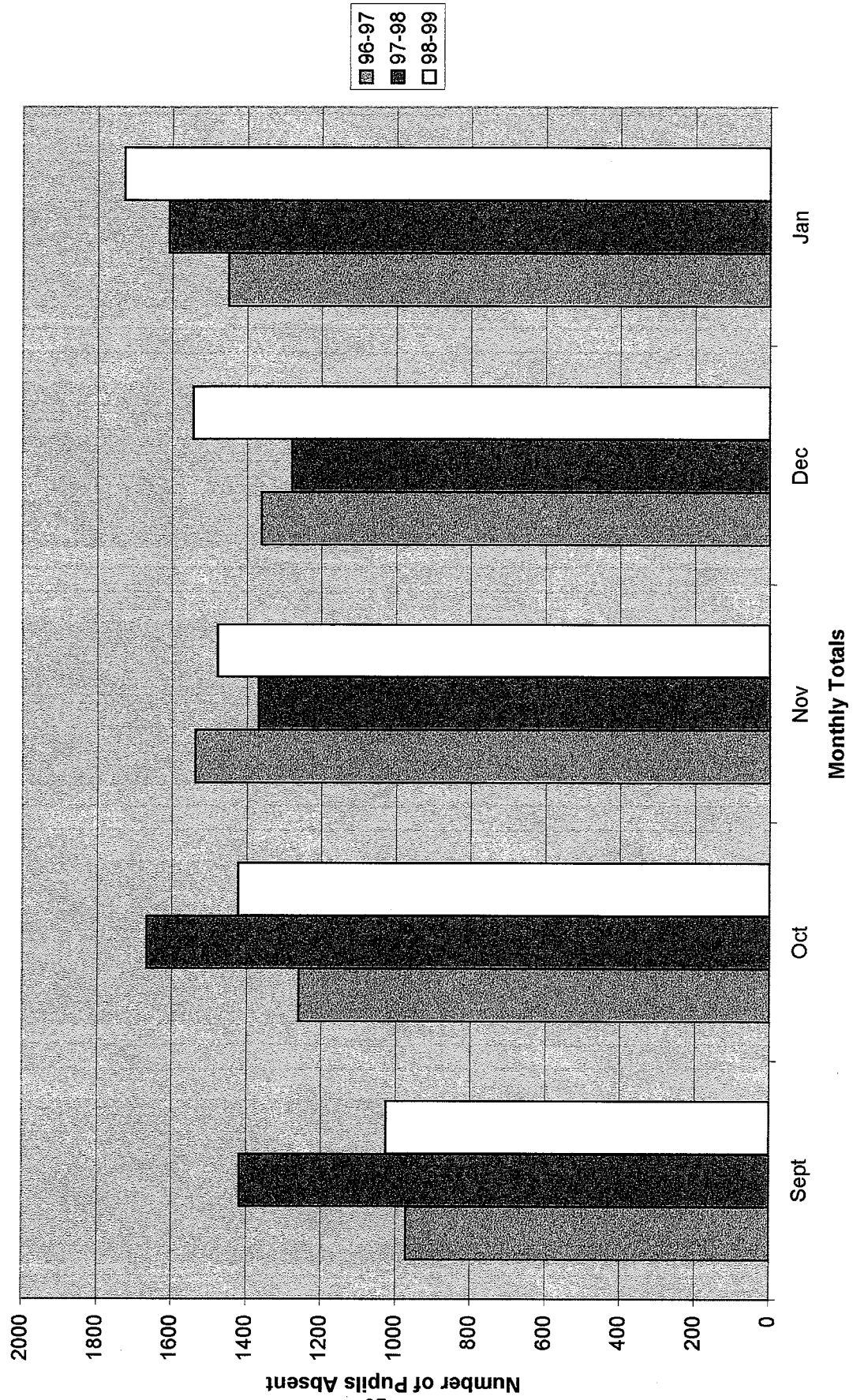
The conclusions reached by the interns regarding the overall project were that:

1. The procedures regarding student tardiness (zero tolerance, major and minor lates, immediate consequences, etc.) have proven effective, based upon the statistical results.
2. The procedures for attendance (Saturday make-up sessions, maximum 6 per marking period, 9 per semester and 18 per year) did not create a parallel level of concern. To many students and their families, absence is preferable to arriving late.
3. The parents were very frustrated regarding the school’s rigid policy and their lack of authority to assess the reason behind their child’s late arrival. They expressed

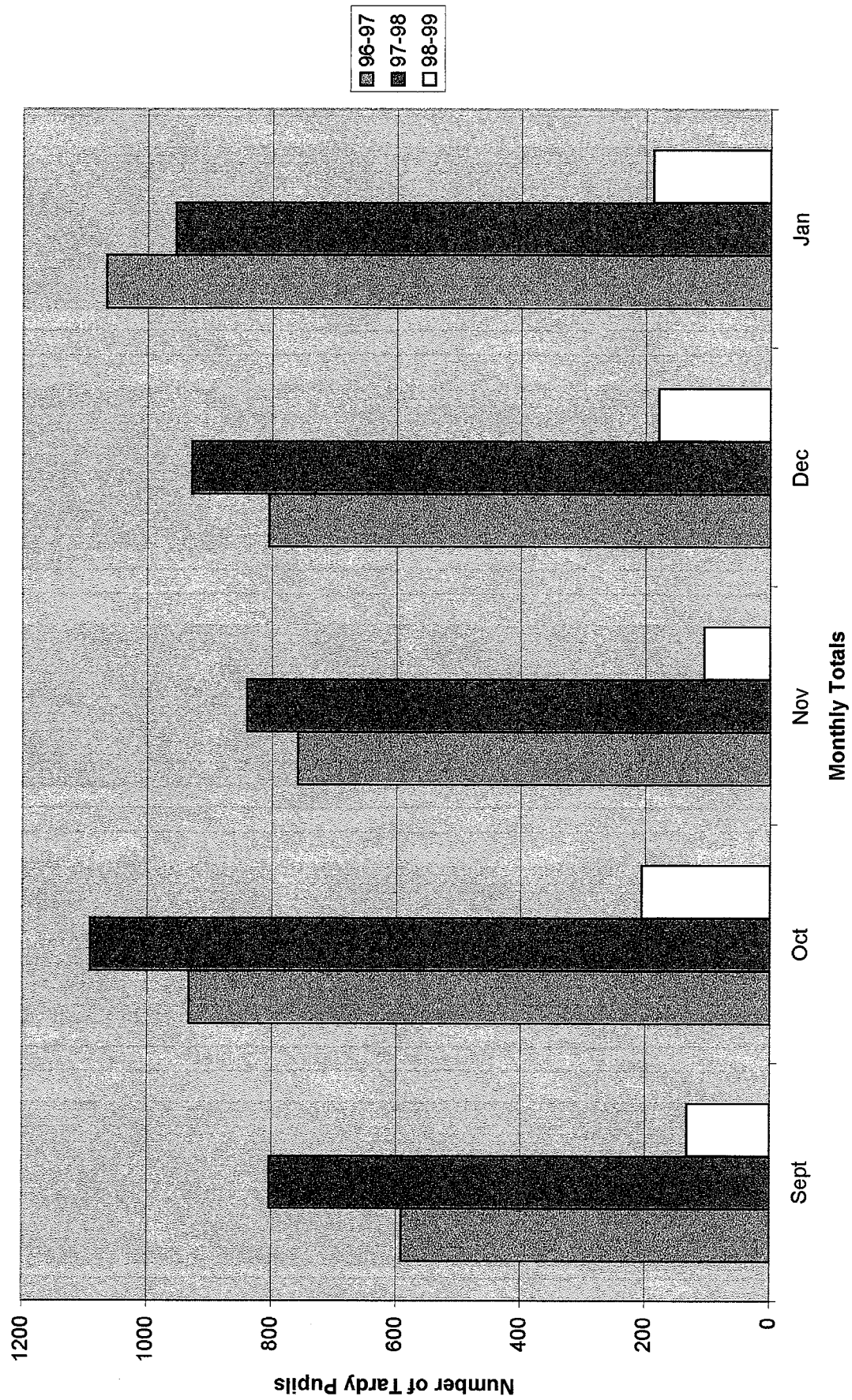
resentment for the school's "usurping" of their parental role. The staff, on the other hand, strongly supported the change and viewed the parent as a major component in the previous problems with tardiness.

4. A by-product of this research was the discovery that the number of student early dismissals, particularly unexcused, has increased substantially (by over 40% in the past two years). Since these count as half-day absences, they have had a major impact on the absence statistics.

**Chart I - MTHS Attendance Statistics**



**Chart II - MTHS Tardiness Statistics**



## Chapter Five

### Conclusions, Implications, And Further Study

The major conclusions of the Study of the effects of Increased Student Accountability and Parental Involvement upon Student Attendance are best presented by responding to the original questions that formulated the Project. It is within these questions that specific aspects of the attendance policies and procedures emerged as strengths or weaknesses, which would then be focused upon in developing an improvement plan, if necessary.

In answer to *What is the effectiveness in increasing student accountability in improving the student attendance/lateness rates?* the data collected shows nearly a 90% reduction in the number of student lates in the first semester. The student attendance rate also improved, although by a far smaller margin. In the sub questions, *How does the school define success for this study?*, success was defined by meeting the goal set with the County Superintendent to reduce lateness by 15%. Since the interns, in the course of the study, surpassed this goal by over 70%, the school definitely defined the study as successful.

The components of consequences were clearly established at the outset of the study. The rewards were less tangible, but both contributed to the effectiveness of the study by providing motivation for compliance and improved attendance.

The second question, *What is the effectiveness of increasing parental involvement on the student attendance/lateness rate?* was answered by the parents in both their actions

and their survey responses. Increased parent contact gave the parents immediate information regarding their student's attendance and tardiness. Phone calls and letters to the home made parents aware not only of their child's absences and late arrivals, but also of the consequences of such problems and their affect on the student's learning abilities.

The primary conclusion drawn from this study was that creating a higher degree of accountability for students and involvement for parents does have a positive impact upon attendance/tardiness. However, the study also revealed concerns regarding the impact of such changes upon both students and parents. Both parents and students indicated an increase in their resentment of the district for their new methods. They considered the new policies using a "zero tolerance" approach lacked compassion and consideration for human foibles, particularly in teenagers.

Parents were very incensed at the reduction of their role in authorizing late arrivals and absences for their children. They had great difficulty accepting that their judgment was not, for the most part, adequate to excuse a late arrival or absence. The most common complaint regarded sending students to school late when they were slightly ill and had a major assignment or presentation due.

The staff was the most positive group regarding the change. They expressed their support for the policies which they found to be more consistent and effective than the past methods. The truth, as they saw it, was demonstrated in the major improvement in the number of late arrivals and in the fact that student awareness and concern in this area had also greatly improved.

The interns did recommend several changes for the 1999-2000 school year. They included:

1. Consequences for lateness should be included on the regular discipline chart in the student handbook so that parents and students will not overlook them because they are not located with other consequences.
2. Consequences should be escalated for repeat offenders on a marking period basis.
3. Early dismissals should be limited and parameters should be clearly defined in the student handbook.
4. College visitations should be better documented, including a form from the school to be completed by the college. Limitations such as senior only, 3 day maximum, etc. also need to be clearly stipulated in the student handbook.
5. Procedures for student lates and absences need to be clearly defined for students and parents via the handbook. All excused absence/late documentation should be submitted to the Nurse to maintain consistency and records. Students should be aware that legal and physician's notes must be submitted and will be accepted late.
6. A summer mailing for parents should take place in early August. A copy of the school calendar and an outline of any changes in attendance procedures should be part of that mailing.
7. Every student, including new enrollees mid-year, should receive a copy of the student handbook.
8. Freshmen students, and their parents, will need a thorough briefing at orientation so that they un\



9. derstand the policies and procedures and how they differ from those of the district's elementary program.

If the district maintains the standards, policies and procedures established by the interns for this project, and implements the recommended changes, the district should continue to maintain an improved attendance rate. The basis for the previous statistics was the lack of consistent accountability. The controversies that arose when the changes were implemented have been addressed. At this point, the students and parents are aware of the new standards and their success. It is their expectation that these procedures, having allowed us to reach the goals set, will continue.

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**Appendix A**  
**Survey Instrument**

MIDDLE TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
Cape May Court House, NJ  
ATTENDANCE POLICY SURVEY  
January, 1999

Using the scantron sheet and #2 pencil provided, please respond to the following questions with the answer that best fits your situation. Please do NOT give multiple answers to the same question.

1. I am a \_\_\_\_\_ at MTHS.
  - a. student
  - b. parent of a student
  - c. member of the teaching/certified staff
  - d. member of the support staff
  - e. other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_
2. I felt the previous attendance policy (prior to this school year) was:
  - a. highly satisfactory
  - b. somewhat satisfactory
  - c. neutral, I neither liked it nor disliked it
  - d. somewhat unsatisfactory
  - e. highly unsatisfactory
3. Prior to the new policy, I/my child/my students was/were usually late:
  - a. 1-4 times per year (once in a marking period)
  - b. 5-8 times per year (twice in a marking period)
  - c. 9-12 times per year (three times in a marking period)
  - d. more than 12 times
  - e. never (either always prompt or not a student here in previous years)
4. I believe that the revised consequences for lateness (30 minute detention, 90 minute detentions) are:
  - a. highly satisfactory/effective
  - b. somewhat satisfactory/effective
  - c. neutral, I neither like them nor dislike them
  - d. somewhat unsatisfactory/ineffective
  - e. highly unsatisfactory/ineffective
5. I find the "zero tolerance" policy (an immediate consequence for every lateness):
  - a. highly satisfactory/effective
  - b. somewhat satisfactory/effective
  - c. neutral, I neither like it nor dislike it
  - d. somewhat unsatisfactory/ineffective
  - e. highly unsatisfactory/ineffective

6. I believe that the new attendance/lateness procedures have:
  - a. improved attendance and reduced tardiness
  - b. forced students to lie and miss school
  - c. had no real effect on attendance/lateness
  - d. increased the parental role in attendance
  - e. alienated parents by reducing their role in decision making
7. I believe that instituting Saturday "make up" sessions for chronic absentees:
  - a. is a fair and effective consequence for chronic absences
  - b. is an improvement over previous years, but not an effective deterrent for absences
  - c. is totally ineffective as a deterrent for absences
  - d. is unfair because it treats "good kids" who are absent the same as behavior problems
  - e. is a waste of staff time and money
8. If I could change one aspect of the lateness policy, it would be:
  - a. the "zero tolerance" policy would be eliminated
  - b. allow parents to excuse lateness
  - c. assign only 30 minute detentions (eliminate "major" lates)
  - d. assign only 90 minute detentions (eliminate "minor" lates)
  - e. have more criteria for "excused" lates
9. If I could change one aspect of the attendance policy, it would be:
  - a. to make "family vacation" days excused absences
  - b. to allow more days for college visitation (present maximum is 3)
  - c. to allow more absences in a marking period (present maximum is 6)
  - d. to not count an unexcused early dismissal as a half day absence
  - e. to allow parents to excuse more than 18 days per year for illness

Please use the balance of this page to note any comments you would like regarding the attendance/lateness policies and procedures.

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### Biographical Data

<b>Name:</b>	Gladys A. Lauriello
<b>High School</b>	Middle Township School Cape May Court House, New Jersey
<b>Undergraduate</b>	Bachelor of Arts Music Lynchburg College Lynchburg, Virginia
<b>Graduate</b>	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, NJ
<b>Present Occupation</b>	Coordinator of Special Projects Middle Township High School Cape May Court House, NJ